DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 603 CG 017 802

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TITLE Anger in the Family: Effective Coping Strategies.
PUB DATE 25 Aug 84
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Coping; Counseling Objectives; *Emotional Problems; Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Counseling; *Family Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Anger

ABSTRACT

In family counseling, the therapist must take into account the developmental level and contextual framework of the family. Within the family, anger can occur over both intrapersonal and interpersonal issues. The therapist must determine the cause for the anger, how it is manifest, and what it represents. Some possible causes for anger within the family are parenting frustrations, marital difficulties, cross-generational alliances, communication problems, unfulfilled individual expectations, and unrealistic expectations. A two or three dimensional therapeutic intervention, encompassing affect, communication, and education, is necessary to help family members cope effectively with anger. On the affective level, individuals must be assisted in becoming aware of their own and others' coping styles. The communication dimension involves helping family members express their feelings in a constructive and thoughtful way. Education involves both the affective and communication dimensions, in that individuals must learn how to deal with their own anger and with the anger of other family members. (Examples from case studies to illustrate the dimensions are given.) (BL)

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ANGER IN THE FAMILY
EFFECTIVE COPING STRATEGIES

by

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APA Convention
August 25, 1984

Anger does not exist in a vacuum. Other emotions are generally interwoven with it. An event, by itself, does not generate anger--it is the individual's perception of that incident which determines whether he or she will be angry or not.

Individuals in a family, similarly, do not live in a vacuum. A family is a dynamic system, comprised of individuals interacting with one another in a highly complex and multifaceted manner. Both the individual and various interactional components must be considered in assessing and working with the family. Consider a mobile--you flick one part of it and every other part of the mobile is affected--so it is in a family.

As a therapist, I view the family from a developmental and contextual framework. I must take into account the developmental level of each family member and determine how each is affecting the other. By contextual framework, I mean the family's belief system--their values, religious and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic level, expectations and behavioral styles. No single issue stands alone. Each family is like a richly woven tapestry.

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Within the family, anger can occur because of intra-personal and inter-personal issues. Feelings of frustration, unmet expectations, defending one's self-esteem because of feeling insulted, criticized or threatened, or feeling that you have been unfairly treated--are all common reasons for angry feelings. The expressions of anger are varied and may include: yelling, hitting, withdrawal, sulking, irratibility, poor school behavior and/or achievement, whining, temper tantrums or annoyance.

There are numerous occasions when anger is an appropriate emotion to experience and exhibit. For example, an adolescent goes to a party and is given a curfew by his or her parents--but returns two hours after the agreed upon time. The parents might be both worried and angry--worried that something may have happened to their youngster and also angry that the adolescent did not think to call and let them know what was going on. Similarly, an adolescent, feeling pressure from parents, tells them angrily to "get off my back--leave me alone".

Angry feelings can serve as a warning signal, alerting the individual that some thought and/or action is required. How one handles those feelings becomes the critical issue. If anger, in its many forms, is constantly used even when inappropriate, tensions will be created within oneself and/or within the household which may require treatment.

As family therapists, we must determine the cause for the anger, how it is manifest and what might it represent. Most often a combination of causes of anger exist and inter-relate. The therapist needs also to determine whether the expression of anger is an attempt to mask underlying issues. In addition, the therapist needs to determine whether or not an individual might be acting out the anger for themselves or someone else within the family. Children frequently are the family agent. A child may over-identify with a parent and act out the anger this parent is unable to convey directly to the other parent; or the child may exhibit behavior and/or academic problems so that the parents need not focus on their own marital problems.

Following are some of the causes for anger within the family:

1. Parenting frustrations exist when one or both parents cannot come to terms with child rearing. They may not know about infant, child and adolescent development--what is normal or abnormal. They may be inconsistent in disciplining the child; there may be a clash in personalities between a parent (or parents) and child; or there may be disappointment, anger, and guilt because a child has a handicap or is ill.

2. Marital difficulties create angry feelings when couples experience communication problems and are unable to support and nurture one another.

3. Cross-generational alliances may create angry feelings because boundaries are not clearly delineated and power is misplaced.

4. Communication problems can lead to angry feelings when family members have difficulty in problem solving and negotiating differences or when an individual (or individuals) have difficulty expressing themselves in terms of what they feel, want or need.

5. Unfulfilled individual expectations can also create angry feelings when a person is extremely unhappy about themselves--their appearance, social, academic or professional achievements.

6. Unrealistic expectations for one or more family member can create angry feelings--both the person having the expectation and the person who is the recipient of these expectations.

A two or three-dimensional therapeutic intervention is necessary to help family members cope more effectively with anger. Affective and communication dimensions need to be dealt with and where specific situations exist, an educational dimension is also needed.

On a affective level, individuals are assisted in becoming more aware of their own styles of coping with frustration and feelings of being threatened.

They can better understand that issues of control, and choice are within their domain. They can think through what is in their best interest and how to best achieve it--whether their automatic past angry style is in their best interest--or what other alternatives are at their disposal.

At the same time, as they become aware of themselves, they are also helped to become aware of how the other family members characteristically react to a variety of situations. With this information, individuals can begin to anticipate reactions and use a preventative strategy, thereby short-circuiting many angry displays. Through their understanding and awareness of one another, they can reframe their own thinking. Instead of angrily responding to a child's fussy, irritable behavior, a parent might be more aware that the child could be tired or have had an unpleasant experience with a friend or teacher.

An educational approach must be included in situations where the anger is related to separation, divorce, illness, children with special educational needs, such as a learning disability or mental retardation, aging parents, adolescents, young children, etc. Family members need a common working vocabulary enabling them to deal more easily and effectively with the particular issue. Individuals need also to be aware of how this situation or condition impacts the lives of each of the family members.

Joanne, age 32, mother of two small children, was certain that Lauren, her four year old daughter, did not trust her, making her feel furious. She complained that Lauren never took her word for anything--if she would say there was no milk left, Lauren insisted on seeing the empty container. Joanne was infuriated at her daughter and they constantly battled. Once Joanne was made aware of developmental issues and how four year olds are very concrete in their thinking and may indeed need to see in order to believe, she became less threatened by her daughter and understood it was not an attempt to get to her.

The communication dimension involves helping family members express their feelings to one another in a more constructive and thoughtful way. In many instances, although anger is the emotion which is quickly voiced or exhibited, there are other underlying feelings such as hurt or disappointment which reflect what is felt. Sue, 17 years old, articulated how angry she was with her father because he had promised to play golf with her and always seemed to have an excuse for not going. The facade she presented was anger, but when questioned more closely, it became apparent that she was deeply hurt because he didn't seem to want to be with her. Her father, not realizing how she really felt, made certain to make the time to golf with her once she had been able to articulate her more genuine feelings. Because Sue was always so quick to express anger, he had not known how much he meant to her.

The process of dealing with anger is two-fold--learning how to deal with one's own anger and also learning how to deal with other family member's anger. The "blinking yellow light" image is frequently of use in that adults and children know that this signal means slow down--exactly what they need to do in order to consider their perceptions and resulting feelings.

It may be useful to take (or give) some private time and space (otherwise known as time-out) to sort out what has occurred. With younger children a variety of strategies may be employed: physically restraining them (gently, but firmly), telling them to stop, removing them from the room, sending them to their room ignoring angry behavior and rewarding more adaptive ways of handling anger, and paradoxical intervention where a parent instructs the young child to have temper tantrums. As important as it is to send children to their rooms--it is equally important for the parents to clearly tell their child that they want them to return as soon as they have calmed down. A critical lesson in growing up is learning that one does have the ability to control one's behavior and also that one can assume responsibility for it.

Sara, at nine years of age, was the eldest of three sisters, the others being seven and three. Her family came to therapy because Sara had frequent

temper tantrums whenever she did not get her way. She also voiced hating her younger sister and wanted to be an only child. Mother, in particular, wanted a "perfect" family which was always harmonious and did not want or know how to deal with negative feelings. One of the issues which had to be dealt with was Sara's temper tantrums and whining, manipulative behavior. Instead of trying to be sweet and understanding, her mother was instructed to send Sara to her room until she calmed down and would be willing to talk about what was making her angry. Father was asked to support his wife and also use the same strategy when he was involved. Sara was quick to begin to let her parents know when she was beginning to feel upset and why--talking about rather than resorting to her prior tantrums.

When an individual is in the midst of experiencing anger, it is impossible for him or her to listen to any rational conversation. Family members need to learn how not to get sucked in--even if they appear to be the target of the other person's anger. Instead, they can be more helpful by remaining calm, keeping some distance (physically and emotionally) in order that they can assess whether they are the legitimate recipient of the angry feelings. When the individual has calmed down and is willing to talk it is helpful to acknowledge their upset without necessarily accepting it. Similarly, if a person uses withdrawal as a means of expressing anger, it is helpful to let them know your awareness of some upset and your availability to talk once they are ready. Questions then may be asked which can clarify what has occurred and what feelings need to be understood and dealt with.

Power struggles or taking a defensive stance generally escalates the anger and does not resolve the issue. It is impossible in any relationship to always agree on all issues, but that need not result in a family member feeling demeaned or angry. Agreeing to disagree can go a long way to preserve a family member's self-esteem. Beginning sentences with "I" creates an atmosphere which is more neutral in contrast with "you" which takes on a blaming and critical tone. "I can't understand you when you are yelling" lets the other know clearly where you stand in contrast to "you always yell

and scream" which puts them on the defensive and will probably lead to a retaliatory statement--rather then addressing the real issue. Sue's father was completely taken aback when after one of his tirades, Sue simply said to him "I can't talk to you when you yell" and walked away. He had been ready for battle, but she refused to get sucked in, necessitating him to react differently as well.

In concluding I would like to repeat a question recently asked in a family session: "Why do some families look as though everything is so perfect, calm and harmonious?" The creation of balance or homeostasis within the family, couple or individual requires a great deal of input in order to achieve the ultimate effect. Families, as dynamic systems, are always changing, always going through periods of disequilibrium to find equilibrium. It is the process whereby family members can communicate, problem solve and develop both as individuals and a family which is crucial. Think of all that our Olympic atheletes needed to do in order to prepare for what looked like an effortless, graceful, beautiful performance. As therapists we can also help families to feel more graceful as they cope with the realities of life.